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SUBJECT: COMPETITIVE PARLIAMENTARY RACES SHAPE UP IN ADJARA

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The autonomous region of Adjara will elect five majoritarian members of parliament on May 21, in addition to party list candidates that will be chosen according to the nationwide vote. Although the United National Movement (UNM) is strong in Adjara and is likely to win all but one of the five majoritarian seats and a majority of votes for the party lists, the races are likely to be close. The Republican Party is also historically strong in Adjara, and the newly-formed Christian Democratic Party may draw a respectable number of votes. The Joint Opposition, however, is offering little to voters except bitterness and promises of post-election rancor. There is no evidence of major electoral fraud in the making, although we did encounter a serious allegation of misuse of city government money and a few complaints by the opposition parties. The media seems passive and unwilling to actively pursue interesting allegations of election misconduct or to sponsor debates on its own without support from non-government organizations (NGO). End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The city of Batumi continues to show signs of increasing prosperity, based on its attractiveness as a destination for tourists, especially from Armenia and Turkey.

Numbers of new restaurants and shops seem to have opened since last summer. Numerous work crews in green city uniforms were busy sprucing up the boulevard along the beach and parks around the old town area. Memories of Aslan Abashidze's corrupt and autocratic rule are still fresh, however. We met with an ad hoc, five-member "focus group" of Batumi residents to find out what issues were foremost in their minds. They included a doctor, a teacher, a businessman, an unemployed person and two students. At least one of them intended to vote for an opposition party and not the governing United National Movement. As a group, they agreed that their greatest concern is the tense situation with Abkhazia and the potential for war. Secondary was the economy, and third were concerns about health and education. We were interested to compare their issues to those cited as important by the political party officials we would meet later in the day.

THE REPUBLICANS

¶3. (SBU) We met with David Berdzenishvili, the Republican's majoritarian candidate for central Batumi. Berdzenishvili is a Batumi native, and along with his brother, Levan Berdzenishvili (running in Tbilisi's upscale Vake District), is a well-known Republican political figure in the city. The Berdzenishvilis were dissidents in Soviet days and as a result, the Republicans have enjoyed enduring popularity in Batumi. Berdzenishvili's main complaint about the election process was that the voter list for the city seems to him to be inflated. He said that the city had only 121,000 residents in 2002. He believes the city's population has not grown since then, but there are 96,000 voters on the list. He claimed the local problem is reflected in the CEC's national voter list, which has 3.5 million voters in a

country that has only between 4 million and 4.5 million voters. He believes that the list has an excess of 800,000 voters in the whole country. He also complained that some of his own family members are not on the voter list in Tbilisi where they live, claiming they had been surreptitiously removed since the presidential election. (Note: The Council of Europe, however, reports that there have been significant improvements to the voters' list since the Presidential election and recommends no further action until after the Parliamentary elections. End note.) Much of his campaign workers' time has been spent going door to door in Batumi trying to verify the names on the voter list. He complained that whereas anyone could check the entire voter list before the January election, now only the voter himself can verify if his name is on the list, which therefore necessitates the door to door effort. (Note: Voters themselves can check their names against the list, which was posted outside election precincts prior to the elections. End note.)

¶4. Berdzenishvili said that 37 percent of the vote in Batumi went for Saakashvili in the January presidential election. He himself is holding four or five meetings a day with voters and going door to door to distribute his brochures. Asked for a copy of the brochures he said he and his campaign workers were distributing, he had none at his campaign headquarters. He said that the Republicans only learned the number their party list will bear on the ballot on April 22. Therefore, he sighed over another unfairness, which is that the United National Movement is still entitled to the number 5 from previous elections. Therefore, posters and brochures had only just been prepared and he intended to start putting them out. Billboards he deemed too expensive. He thought that the ubiquitous National Movement billboards and posters

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in Batumi were alienating voters. Another complaint Berdzenishvili raised was that one school principal refused to let him meet with teachers during working hours, claiming it would disrupt schoolwork.

¶5. Berdzenishvili was familiar with the concerns expressed by the focus group, ticking off from the list health care, foreign policy and employment as key local issues and Abkhazia, employment, education and health and miscellaneous personal problems such as natural gas cutoffs, living space limitations and pensions as nationwide issues. He said that a high turnout in the parliamentary elections will help the Republicans. He thinks the Joint Opposition and the Christian Democrats will win some votes, but said those parties do not have strong majoritarian candidates. To win, he claimed the United National Movement is relying on its "administrative resources", and its alleged control of all election commission chairperson and secretary positions.

JOINT OPPOSITION

¶6. At the offices of the Joint Opposition, their campaign manager, Jumber Tavartkiladze, said that his gut feeling suggests that 80 to 85 percent of Batumi residents support his movement. He based this judgment on his 10 or so meetings per day, which drew 55-70 people to each, all of whom were enthusiastic for the opposition. This enthusiasm derives from the mistakes Saakashvili has made, he said, which mainly consist of "putting many Georgians in jail." Like Berdzenishvili, Tavartkiladze complained of problems with the voter list. He said he can prove that the elections are already falsified. Only 70,000 of the 96,000 names on the voter list are real, and "dead souls" and duplicate names can be found in all the 74 precincts in Adjara, he said. He showed us a handful of complaints he had prepared for the Precinct Electoral Commission, each of which had 10 or 15 suspect names on it. Seven people on one of them supposedly were living at an address occupied by the city morgue, he claimed.

¶7. Tavarkiladze's list of important campaign issues differed

from the focus group, but neatly coincided with the Joint Opposition view of Georgia. He said the issues were lack of rule of law, justice and an independent judiciary. He also cited human rights violations, especially restrictions on free speech. Private property protections are lacking and people are afraid of being evicted from their apartments, he said. It is almost impossible to find a job in Adjara and it small businesses are being suffocated, he said. Both were surprising claim given the obvious economic renaissance in Batumi. He explained that taxes collected go directly to the police.

¶18. Curious whether anything in his background accounted for his dim view of Saakashvili's Georgia, we asked what he did in Soviet days and under the reign of Aslan Abashidze in Adjara. The white-haired Tavarkiladze laughed, said he was 39 and did not hold a job before 1991, and added that after 1997, he worked as head of the department of communications in Abashidze's Ministry of Internal Affairs. He said he and his family led demonstrations against Abashidze in 2004. He is a member of the People's Party.

¶19. Asked his opinion of the new Christian Democratic Party, Tavartkiladze. He said that the party is not popular and that people remember its leader, Giorgi Targamadze, as betraying Imedi television and the Georgian people by closing the station in December. He insinuated that the party's local majoritarian candidate is a puppet of the United National Movement, because he is being investigated on criminal charges and would not have run without a guarantee of protection. Tavartkiladze continued that six members of his own family had been arrested in Batumi for saying that if the government falsifies the May election they would lead a public revolt. They had been released from prison only a few days before, and Tavartkiladze credited intervention by the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi for their release, after his father had met with Poloff. He said he was very grateful for that.

GEORGIAN YOUNG LAWYERS ASSOCIATION

¶10. The Director of the local chapter of the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), Nino Talalashvili, is an articulate, well-educated attorney. She painted a picture of a relatively fair election environment. GYLA has been monitoring the two local television Channels, TV Adjara and Channel 25. The NGO will supply 150 monitors on election day, some stationed in precincts and other moving from place to place in the mountainous areas of Adjara. GYLA has trained television station employees in their

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responsibilities under Georgian law, Talalashvili said. She said all the candidates are getting their fair share of time on television and in that respect the situation was better than during the presidential election.

¶11. Talalashvili cited one particular election violation by the National Movement: the Minister of Education accompanied a United National Movement majoritarian candidate at a campaign meeting, during the Minister's regular working hours. Also, some candidates had been giving small gifts to voters, although the practice had stopped. She could not think of any incidents of intimidation or blackmail of voters. Nor had she heard of pressure on teachers. She confirmed what Brdzenishvili had said, that the population of Batumi is not growing significantly. Although more jobs are being created, she said, people still live in their villages and are on the voters lists there, preferring to commute into Batumi for work. She fears that frequent elections and disappointment with the process are contributing to apathy among voters and lower turnout.

THE UNITED NATIONAL MOVEMENT

¶12. The local campaign manager for the United National Movement Giorgi Chakhnashvili told us that he knows the

parliamentary elections will not be easy and that Batumi is an important place to win votes and seats in Parliament. The UNM is trying to keep the campaign positive and focus on future plans, despite the negative approach by the opposition. The party has more than 1000 "micro-coordinators" in Adjara who are going door to door, distributing literature, surveying voter preferences, mobilizing supporters and getting out the vote. It has benefited from training by USAID-funded NDI and IRI programs and has taken their recommendations to heart. He recalled that the UNM won the presidential vote in Batumi by 4000 votes over the closest challenger. He expects the UNM to do better in the parliamentary election because the opposition is fragment

¶13. The campaign manager dismissed opposition predictions that the campaign will be inevitably rigged, citing the presence of opposition party members on the Precinct Election Commissions and among precinct-level election monitors. He considers the fact that opposition members must sign the precinct's protocol an important guarantee. He admitted that few opposition members had been chosen as precinct chairs or secretaries, but seemed unconcerned. He denied that the UNM has any wish to falsify the elections, or even the means to do so. He considered any errors in the voter lists to be minor, noting that the Republicans had reported only 57 duplicate names. He claimed that names could not be arbitrarily deleted from the list without clear evidence that they are deceased or were no longer present in the districts.

CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS

¶14. Niaz Zosidze, the Batumi campaign manager for the newly formed Christian Democratic (CD) Party, said that the Christian Democrats want to be the "constructive opposition" in Georgia. He added that his party disagrees with the often heard calls for revolt against Saakashvili, but "will not protect the government from the people's anger, and will protect them from government aggression." The party's slogan is "time for change", with change needed in nearly all sectors of Georgian society. The CD message to the government is that it must address people's needs, Zosidze said. Aside from that, the CD's mission is to "bring Orthodox morality to politics", Zosidze said. He said that his party is tolerant of other religions, but wants to protect Georgia from "aggressive atheism". He expressed particular concern about sects that admonish their members that they should not protect the state, or should not give blood. Such sects are a danger to families, he explained. Nevertheless, he said the party is for peaceful cooperation with those who do not seek to divide people with different religions, including the Jews.

¶15. Zosidze said that one example of the party's positive message is its promotion of a new water policy, to make Georgia an exporter of what will in the future be a scarce commodity in the region and the world. Georgia has abundant sources of water and investors are ready to help the country develop them, so that all Georgians have enough and there is some left over for export. The party wants to reimburse people who lost money in the 1990's in failed banks. It wants to rejuvenate tea and citrus farming with state subsidies to agriculture.

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¶16. Zosidze said that he is a professor at the local university. He said that he ran into problems with the UNM when he became active in opposition politics. He was removed as head of the department in which he worked, but was allowed to keep his job because the UNM had no legal power to remove him as a professor. He has experienced no other pressure from the government because of his activities, he said. The two local television stations have not sponsored any debates or talk shows featuring the parties recently, Zosidze said.

They only show video of the various parties' meetings with voters.

¶17. Zosidze was proud of the "dynamic development" of the young CD party. After starting in April, the party now has three offices in Batumi. It will field candidates in three of the five majoritarian districts in Adjara: Kobuleti, Batumi and Koden. The party can afford only 10 salaried coordinators in Batumi and relies on volunteers to get the rest of its work done. Funds and publications are distributed to Batumi from the central party office in Tbilisi. Campaign strategy is to hold meetings, hear people's problems, write them down, analyze them, and work out solutions. Like the UNM, the party has taken advantage of training offered by USAID-funded NDI, and is training party workers on its own. Still, Zosidze said that there is fear among voters to express open support for the CD. As an example, he said that an activist in Batumi had been told not to campaign by an unknown person. Zosidze said the CD wants to take advantage of people's lack of trust in the existing system. Most people think economic development is too weak, he said, and educated people are concerned by instability and unfairness in the political and judicial systems. Not surprisingly, he said that IDP's show the most interest in the problems of the separatist regions. The IDP's feel ignored and that they have no role in solving the conflicts, he said.

THEQDIA

¶18. We met with reporters from a local newspaper, a radio station and one of the locQAdjara Qevision stations, TV25. In general, they demonstrated a lack of willingness to pursue aggressive journalism and to follow up on election problems that their reporting revealed. The television station was not running any debates, its reporter said, because funding from NGO's for them had dried up. He had no explanation for why the station was unwilling or unable to organize debates on its own, which would seem to be a rather low-budget proposition. One of the reporters, who works for a local weekly newspaper, told us that the Batumi city government had appropriated GEL 600,000 (USD 414,000) for a door to door survey of people's economic status, just before the elections. The contract for performing the survey was granted to the United National Movement without an open tender, which is required for contracts of that size. The reporter said that there was no response to the article from the local government about what seemed to be an obvious gift to the UNM to fund door to door campaigning and give it inside knowledge of voters' situations. However, she had not found the city officials' lack of response newsworthy enough to publish in subsequent editions of the weekly paper. Nor had the television station followed up on the report by testing its accuracy and interviewing city officials.

TEFFT